

Content Criticism and the Historical-Critical Method

Henry Hamann

Some years ago I was in discussion with Guenther Bornkamm on a street corner near Moore Theological College, Sydney, New South Wales. We were discussing lectures that had been given by Dennis E. Nineham on the resurrection of Jesus. Nineham had taken the position that the resurrection of Jesus was a story invented by the early Christians to explain their faith in Jesus. This was the first time I had come up against this particular explanation, and I was pretty free with my criticism. Bornkamm made an observation, which I take to be the key to a very great deal of modern writing on the NT. He said: "But we cannot get away from our own shadow." That is to say: What is not in keeping with our present world-view cannot be true, and if historical incidents are involved they *cannot* have happened as they are reported to have happened.

Now, your moderns state this conviction with all possible clarity and sharpness. The writers of *Biblical Criticism*, Vol. 3 of "The Pelican Guide to Modern Theology", for example, write concerning the miracle stories of the New Testament:

... in the case of miracles they (the form critics) point to the likeness to stories circulating in both the Jewish and the Hellenistic world of the time when the gospels were being written, and to the pre-suppositions of such stories; these were very often that the illnesses were caused by demons, so that the effectiveness of the story and therefore its truth depends upon belief that Jesus exorcized the demons and so worked his cures. Since we now know that demons are not the causes of diseases we cannot believe the stories; but we can assign a reason for their having been told of Jesus—the desire to enhance his reputation. This desire lay in the minds of the members of the early church (pp. 248-249).

A second example comes from Willi Marxsen's *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*. His position throughout the writing is that nothing in our experience or our knowledge of reality gives us the right to expect a dead man to rise, and that therefore a factual or physical resurrection could not have occurred. Accordingly he can write: "I said earlier that I could say of a past event that it was a miracle only if I experienced a corresponding miracle today." Again:

Anyone who says this was not a real event [i.e., the resurrection of Jesus] is therefore saying something different from what these writers thought [i.e., the NT writers]. But is he therefore necessarily wrong? It must be at least admitted that the authors of the texts were expressing *their* view, while the person who says something different is expressing *his*. The two opinions may diverge. But then it must surely be permissible to discuss the question who is right.

It is obvious in this case of conflict where Marxsen stands: He will uphold the modern world-view against the convictions of the NT authors.

Our third example consists of some sentences from a very famous writing of Rudolf Bultmann, the essay which introduced his whole program of demythologization and which first appeared in 1941.

For all our thinking is shaped for good or ill by modern science. . . Now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in *spirits, whether good or evil*. . . *Man is essentially a unity*. He bears the sole responsibility for his own feeling, thinking, and willing Biological man cannot see how a supernatural entity like the *pneuma* (Spirit) can penetrate within the close texture of his natural powers and set to work within him. . . Again, the biblical doctrine that *death is the punishment of sin* is equally abhorrent to

naturalism and idealism, since they both regard death as a simple and necessary process of nature.

An interesting variation on the theme that what cannot have happened according to our view of nature did not happen is the claim that the more likely historical situation is the right and proper historical situation. For an example of this supposedly-historical principle we turn to the writers of the first example just referred to, Robert Davidson and A.R.C. Leaney, authors of *Biblical Criticism*. They contrast the reading of the Gospels by an uncritical reader and the critical scholar. The uncritical reader believes the real situation to be that which the text suggests every time. For instance, in Mark 12:13-17, the Pharisees and Herodians ask Jesus a question about taxes, to which Jesus gives the well-known answer: "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things which are God's". The simple reader transports himself back to the temple near the end of Jesus' life and sees an attempt by enemies of Jesus to trick Him into making a damaging statement.

The form critic suspects almost everything about the little story. He finds a different situation, in which the main line of the incident might fit better: Members of the early church needed guidance on the problem whether they ought to pay taxes to the Roman Empire in view of their loyalty to God and their belief that the judgment on this world was near at hand. Would payment of taxes be consistent with Christian principles? The story gives the answer Yes. "A story was invented which invested a prudent practice with the Lord's authority." It is necessary, in passing, to point out how the principle we have illustrated in various ways quite demolishes the Christian faith, if indeed the attentive reader has not already drawn that obvious conclusion for himself. Davidson and Leaney are quite frank and open about the results of biblical criticism upon the content of the ancient creeds. They point with satisfaction to the advantages that accrue once we have come to the point of seeing that we have excellent accounts of the ways the evangelists envisaged Jesus and His career, but that we have no right to say, "This is what actually happened".

The Jesus who seems to have entered upon a career of self- advertisement, proclaiming in effect, "I am the son of God; therefore anyone who questions my authority will be lost!" is now seen to be a fantasy. . . We come rather to the conclusion that Jesus may be properly regarded not as a phantasm who came down from heaven to earth and went back again, but as a man of such quality ...

Other considerations concern Paul: Is there any meaning still to be given to his words when he says of Christ Jesus that "God designed him to be the means of expiating sin by his sacrificial death, effective through faith" (Rom. 3:25)? Or, again, if criticism shows that Jesus did not found a church but sought to reform a community which he already regarded as the people of God, what authority-indeed, what point-is there in the church of today? ... Can we attach any meaning to the doctrine of the grace of God? ... Is there any reality corresponding to that in the New Testament expressed in the words, "the Holy Spirit"?

Bultmann's famous essay referred to earlier goes the same way. All the statements of the Apostles' Creed are regarded as mythological, except "He was crucified, dead, and buried". Incarnation, Virgin Birth, Redemption, Resurrection, Descent into Hell, Ascension, Session (sitting) at the right hand of God, the Return to Judgment-these are all myths, like the nature myths of the ancients, together making up the truth presented that the authentic human life is the life that does not look for security but that lives wholly from faith and in love.

It is time to look critically at the historical principle with which we began this chapter: what is not in keeping with our present world-view, our convictions concerning nature and man in it, cannot have happened and did not happen.

We begin with the relation between historical fact and practical possibility. I think we may grant that normally we look for more proof in proportion to the unlikelihood of some event or happening. If I am informed by my wife that some bad boys are raiding my orange tree, I leave my desk at once to deal with the intruders. If, however, she tells me that there are elephants in the back garden, I shall probably not do anything till they actually burst into the house. The logical end of this normal process of reasoning is indeed to be sceptical and unbelieving when what is asserted to have happened is something that neither I nor anybody else has actually experienced. In short, this amounts to support of the principle: what is impossible according to my view of the world is non-historical.

But in making this statement, we must know what we are doing: we are leaving the strictly historical method of determining what happened from the evidence that is there, in order to determine what happened from a prejudice, a prejudgment, a dogmatic position. I should really accept the witness, the evidence, of reliable witnesses if they tell me about marauding boys or erring elephants. I should do this, on strictly historical grounds, even if the witness happens to be *one* reliable person. Not to do so shows the operation of the prejudice based on probabilities and possibilities. What lies behind our normal reaction of non-belief when the humanly impossible is asserted is a philosophy, a world-view, not the principle of historical evidence pure and simple. The position of critical biblical scholars, too, is based on dogma, philosophy, certain scientific prejudices, not on strictly historical arguments.

In that respect the critic is not one whit more scientific, historically, than the non-critical conservative. The latter's non-critical reading of the New Testament is based on the prejudice of the Christian creeds: that miracles did and can happen; that God is almighty and can enter history and the individual tightly-knit human being; that Jesus was and is the pre-existent Son of God, one with the Father, and that this authority was His also in His few years in Palestine; that He did rise from the dead into a new life; that in His reign over all things He sends His Spirit to bring men to salvation; etc. Obviously, once we have granted the presence in history of a truly divine Being, of this new dimension which far transcends the human, then previous impossibilities become possibilities. The whole field of what is possible and what happened, historically speaking, is immensely enlarged. But, as just pointed out, the historical critic has his own set of dogmas and prejudices.

So what we see in the debate between conservative and critical biblical scholars are not really different views of history, but different faiths, philosophies, and convictions as to what truth is. We have at bottom a battle between faith and unbelief. Which is not to say that all critical scholars are unbelievers. God alone must judge who are His and who are not. But there can be no doubt that the difference between the fundamental attitudes toward history that have been outlined is that of faith and unbelief. Some words from C. S. Lewis's *Miracles* are decidedly to the point here, words that contain also a call to Christians to "get rid of their own shadows":

When you turn from the New Testament to modern scholars, remember that you go among them as a sheep among wolves. Naturalistic assumptions ... will meet you on every side—even from the pens of clergymen. This does not mean ... that these clergymen are disguised apostates . . . It comes partly from what we may call a "hangover". We all have Naturalism in our bones and even conversion does not at once work the infection out of our system. . . And in part the procedure of these scholars arises from the feeling which is greatly to their

credit. . . They are anxious to allow to the enemy every advantage he can with any show of fairness claim ...

In using the books of such people you must therefore be continually on guard. You must develop a nose like a bloodhound for those steps in the argument which depend not on historical and linguistic knowledge but on the concealed assumption that miracles are impossible, improbable, or improper. And this means that you must really re-educate yourself; must work hard and consistently to eradicate from your mind the whole type of thought in which we all have been brought up.

The effect of the conviction that only what is possible according to our modern world-view can be historical is not merely to demolish the traditional faith as such-its worst result. The critic feels in duty bound to put something in the place of what he has torn down. If things did not happen as we are told in the NT they did, what did happen? If there was no resurrection in the sense of the church's confession, then what did take place? And how did the idea of a resurrection arise? Taking the specific instance of the resurrection of Jesus, we have a good example of scholarly (?) reconstruction in Willi Marxsen's *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, a work referred to earlier. Here is part of his explanation of what happened:

I said earlier that the experience of being called to faith by Jesus was interpreted with the help of already existing ideas. Let me show in more detail what I mean. Someone discovers in a miraculous way that Jesus evokes faith even after his death. He now asks what makes it possible for him to find faith in this way. The reason is that the Jesus who died is alive. He did not remain among the dead. But if one wanted to claim that a dead person was alive, then the notion of the resurrection of the dead was ready to hand. So one made use of it. In doing so there was no need to pin oneself down to a particular form of this idea; and it is quite possible that different notions were associated with the doctrine in various sections of the primitive church. But the common formula "Jesus is risen" could still be used. Or one could go a stage further in interpretation and say: "God raised Jesus from the dead."

Marxsen finds other phrases in the NT to state the fact that Jesus still works faith today, like the idea of exaltation. Consistently he goes on to declare that, if the primitive church found interpretative phrases like resurrection and exaltation, we have the right to find other phrases for the same purpose, phrases which may be more comprehensible and so more valuable today. He suggests two: "Still he comes today" and "The cause of Jesus continues". Marxsen's actual argument does not concern us-it is very weak and can be shot full of holes. It is mentioned only as one example of what goes on continually in all NT critical work. It is a direct result of the declaration that the miraculous has no historical standing. If we could imagine the NT without the miraculous, then I doubt very much whether any NT scholar would spend one sleepless night inventing substitute situations-in-life for those the Gospels tell us of. It would be a fruitless occupation.

The truth is that it is just not a historical task to invent history to replace the supposedly historical situation you have rejected. If the historian has a number of conflicting accounts of an event or conflicting pictures of some historical character, he can make a choice among them or between them, or he may be able to find some combination which has historical plausibility about it. The historian, for instance, has very different pictures of Socrates in Plato's *Dialogues*, Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, and in Aristotle. He will use his historical skill and perception built up over the years to arrive at a picture of Socrates which seems to fit all the evidence, accepting some evidence outright, rejecting other evidence, and harmonizing accounts where possible. But where he has only one account, one strand of evidence, he can accept it or reject it. He can't make up something to take the place of the evidence he has rejected. Or he *can*; but what results is only an indication of his

own ingenuity and cleverness, as a novel is, but it has *no historical validity or standing at all*. This judgment is really the same as that made in a previous chapter concerning the need to keep silent where we do not know, but it has been gained through argument from another point of view.

The scholarly activity we have been describing and criticizing in these chapters is frequently called "the historical-critical method". A consideration of this term and its underlying philosophy can act as a convenient summary of what we have been doing.

The historical-critical method is not always described as clearly and sharply as it might be. The reason for this is not that there *can* be no clear description and definition of it, but the fact that many writers want to have their cake and eat it as well. They do not personally share the basic philosophy or theology of the pure practitioners of the method, but at the same time they would like their work to be recognized as scholarly, an end which can hardly be achieved without tipping the cap to historical criticism. So on occasion we meet descriptions which may leave the reader in uncertainty as to what the historical-critical method really is. However, no one is helped by such a state of affairs. For understanding, we need clear ideas, sharp outlines, as accurate definitions as possible. Such a clear description of the historical-critical method follows, and every reader should be aware that of the many biblical scholars in the world who accept the method none would find fault with this description. It comes from the Introduction (written by R.P.C Hanson) to the previously mentioned Vol. 3 of "The Pelican Guide to Modern Theology". This is how the historical-critical method is understood by the present writer, and this is what will be examined critically. Only a hundred years ago, most Christians of all traditions would have been quite content to describe the Bible as inerrant, infallible, and inspired equally in every part... But in spite of shocked churchmen ... the revolution moved inexorably on. It consisted in the simple but far-reaching discovery that the documents of the Bible were *entirely conditioned by the circumstances of the period in which they were produced* [my italics] . . . It meant that the books of the Bible were henceforth open to being treated precisely as all other ancient documents are treated by historians of the ancient world. No sanctity, no peculiar authority, no special immunity to objective and unsparing investigation according to the most rigorous standards and methods of scholarship, could ever again be permitted to reserve the Bible from the curious eyes of scholars. The Bible might well in future be approached by scholars with presuppositions about it in their minds, but not the presupposition that this book is a sacrosanct preserve whose historical accuracy and literal truth must be maintained intact.

The historical-critical method as just defined and described is *not* a legitimate, appropriate, relevant method of study for Christian theologians and Christian people. The Christian has a faith, certain convictions about what is truth and what not, which simply cannot be adjusted to or harmonized with the historical-critical method. If he confesses the Apostles' Creed, and other more developed creeds in agreement with it, he is committed to a series of statements (of course, not mere statements, but truths of the gravest import) which are just not possible where the historical-critical method is being consistently employed. We have already pointed out that for historical criticism miracles are impossible, that what we have not experienced and what our world-view does not permit cannot have happened. For the critical historian, man, not God, is the authority. The method allows no room whatever for the Word of God. There remains only the subjective judgment, maybe, that such-and-such is Word of God for me. But this also is pure self-deception. What is Word of God for me can never be set forth as Word of God for anyone else. And if I myself, in my own individual person and on that basis alone, decide what is Word of God, then there is no difference between

Word of God and my own judgment. Word of God is my own word, and has no more authority. And "God" itself becomes a mere convenient expression for what touches me most deeply. All this puts an unbridgeable gulf between the faith and convictions of the Christian-"Christian" defined in the only legitimate way as one whose faith is that of the church's creeds-and the consistent practitioner of the historical-critical method. No kind of logic or glib talk or prevarication can bring the two together.

However, the judgment just made does not mean that no aspect of the method we are talking about can be of use for the Christian. It is the historical-critical method as such which is impossible for the Christian, the method seen from its innermost being and rationale. But this does not eliminate the possibility that certain aspects of it may have their value, aspects which are peripheral, by the way, accidental, when compared with the heart of the method, but which in themselves are of considerable importance. Some of these may be referred to briefly at this point.

Our knowledge of the language of the NT has been immeasurably increased and made more accurate by the detailed investigation of the Greek of the NT period. It is plain from these studies that the Greek of the NT is not some heavenly Greek, Greek of the most perfect kind, nor a debased, bastard Greek, but simply the common Greek (Koine) of the period, the Greek which developed over great parts of the eastern Mediterranean as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Writers of the NT differ quite greatly in their use of this Greek, with Mark representing a rather low level of written Koine, Hebrews the opposite extreme. What better medium for the spread of the Gospel than the commonly-spoken language of the time?

The backbreaking, detailed work involved in the study of early written texts has resulted in the situation that we can have extreme confidence in the text of our NT, up to 95 per cent of the whole, an absolutely staggering percentage when we compare it with the situation that prevails in respect to all other ancient Greek and Latin literature.

The literary analysis of our texts, too, has brought us to understand them considerably better, although we shall probably never understand them as well as those who first wrote and read them. Strange, way-out, and radical theories concerning our NT writings are advanced often enough, but the correction of these lies in the writings themselves, to which all have access, and sound common sense soon relegates many of these literary vagaries to limbo.

So also, the close study of religions contemporary with the rise of Christianity is not without advantage for NT studies. After all, the early Christians preached the Gospel to peoples who, apart from the Jews, were all heathen. They had to make the Gospel intelligible to them, show the difference between what they had previously believed and the new thing being proclaimed to them. Some of this conversation or confrontation, naturally, has been transferred to the NT writings, so that they in turn, especially the writings of St Paul and St John, become more intelligible when the heathen opponent is better understood. Here, too, there are false developments, as when scholars write as though the Christian religion was hardly more than an amalgam of Jewish and heathen religious ideas. Here, too, correction of a wrong picture is easy, for the NT is there, and the documents of the heathen religions as well. No one can be imposed upon who does not want to be!

The same observations, however, cannot be made concerning form criticism and its development in redaction criticism. Here, as has been pointed out, we are no longer dealing with knowns, but with unknowns, in very great part. In this area the baleful effects of a criticism which denies the miraculous become painfully evident. There is no possibility from within the discipline itself to correct developments that destroy the Christianity of the creeds. The form critic cannot in any

absolute way be proved wrong in many of his guesses, but neither can he, by the same token, show that he is right. And if he insists on his "shadow", his conviction, his philosophy, his prejudice that nothing can have happened that we have not experienced, in short that miracles are impossible, then we conservative believers can do nothing else than insist on our faith, our conviction, our prejudice that the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and the other miracles that make up the Christian faith *have* happened. Or, in other words, as we have pointed out before, different prejudices, different convictions, different faiths make for different conclusions-not different understandings as to what constitutes evidence. The heart of the historical-critical method is a faith, a philosophy, a view of the world and of nature. That philosophy the Christian believer cannot accept. And so, while using those results of historical-critical study that can be liberated from the underlying philosophy, he cannot, and ought not, and will not accept the method in all its parts and with all its presuppositions.

Well, what then will be an acceptable method for him? The simple answer is: a historical method which does not dissolve the foundations of his faith. That method we may call a historical-biblical method. We can't get away from the element of history; that must be made plain. God has chosen to make Himself known and to carry out His plan of salvation for men in and through history. Once this has happened, even God cannot extricate Himself from the history into which He has placed Himself, that is, from that portion of history in which He has acted uniquely, very particularly, once for all-for our salvation. Historical study must remain, historical investigation as rigorous as we can make it. If possible, the Christian theologian should be even more at home in the pertinent history than the historical critic, for he has more to lose than the historical critic if the history becomes uncertain, doubtful, or even untrue. The historical critic can face any upset of the history without turning a hair. The history is at bottom unimportant for his theology; what counts is the thought, the idea, the abiding truth. He can always end up as an existentialist, a humanist, an atheist, a socialist, or what have you. But the Christian will end up with nothing. If Jesus of Nazareth in His birth, life, and death is not the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, then he has no God left whom he knows and whom he can worship. If the Resurrection was no real resurrection but only an early Christian construction, a means of interpreting a certain experience, then, again, the whole Christian faith evaporates, leaving nothing behind but some moral ideas. And these we can find in any case in other religions or in the moral teachings of various philosophers, so that we would not miss very much if even these vestiges of ethics disappeared. The Christian faith is so closely tied up with history, then, because God Himself, so the Christian revelation has it, entered into history for our salvation.

The Christian's attention to history, however, will operate within the limits and controls of the biblical witness, within the controls crystallized in the Christian creeds: that "Jesus Christ came down from heaven for us and for our salvation, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures." This is not a scheme arbitrarily imposed upon the historical facts, but the witness of the facts themselves as interpreted by Jesus Himself and handed down to the church through His chosen apostles. This is the Christian faith, and as long as Christians remain here on this earth, Christian theologians will be compelled by their faith to interpret the New Testament historically *and* biblically.